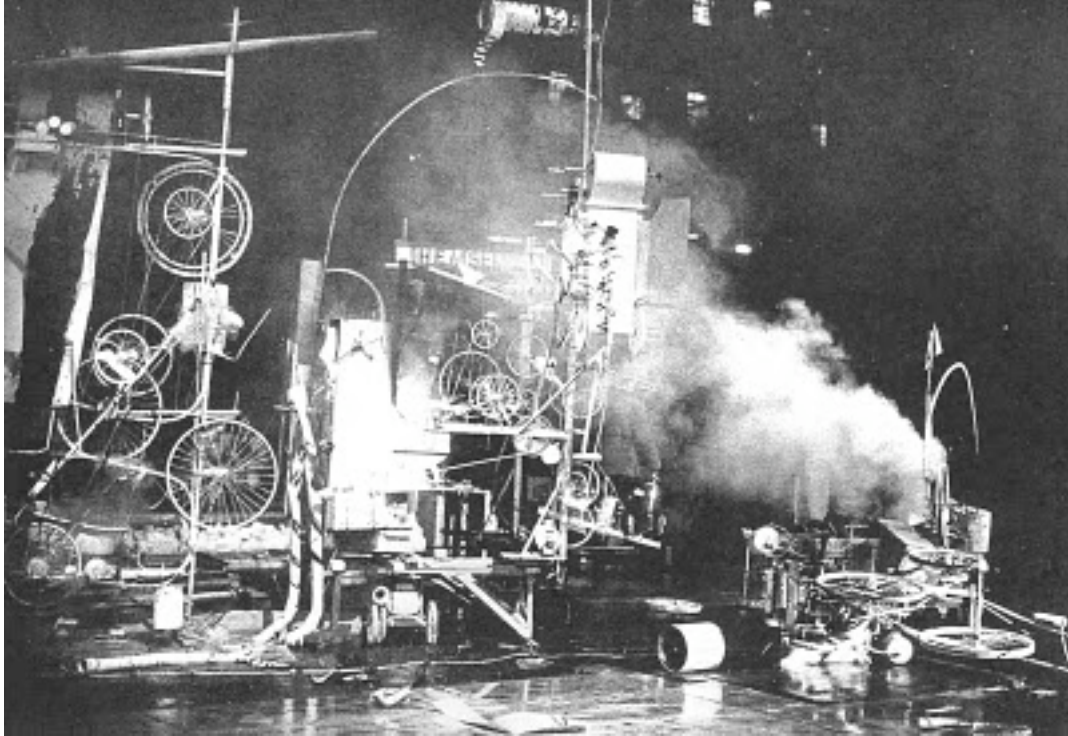


Failure and Error and Chance (in Art)



Jean Tinguely, «Homage to New York», 1960

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In current art, chance of failure is assimilated into the very definition of what art does best. What is valuable in art is its indeterminate identity and function - its realm of freedom and non-systematic messiness.¹ Failure in one moment (as defined by that moment) can shift quickly to the position of utmost value in the next. Often, failure is re-evaluated in art - and this re-evaluation helps art to expand.

¹ This messiness includes, no doubt, the risk of being ignored or despised.

For example boredom, the failure to entertain, was an important defining value in 1960s minimalism (take for example, Andy Warhol's 1964 film *Empire*, that consists of eight hours and five minutes of continuous slow motion footage of the Empire State Building). So for most artists, way down deep we understand failure as a potentially positive swerve away from the norm.

There is also an interesting association between error and failure in art. Errors are frequently productive in art. Here I point you towards Philadelphia, where you can see Marcel Duchamp's renowned work *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. Duchamp formally declared the work "unfinished" in 1923. During shipping however, following its first (and only unbroken) public exhibition, the glass was symmetrically shattered; receiving numerous large cracks in it. Duchamp repaired it, but left the cracks in the glass intact, accepting the chance element as a part of the piece. This shattering chance error had in fact finished the piece - and in my opinion greatly improved it - by adding lines of energy into the homogeneous material.

Duchamp's case demonstrates that the productiveness of failure in art operates in defiance of programmatic, systematic and unitary ideals – ideals that lurk behind neo-classicism and scientific naturalism. Of course there are mistakes to be made in art – but not (necessarily) errors made in its production.

The biggest source of failure in art is in failing to take risks that engage with the automatic qualities of error.² For errors cannot be forced - or they become theatrical devices. This issue of theatricality in art has been thoroughly critiqued by Michael Fried in his essay *Art and Objecthood* (1967) where Fried criticized the *theatricality* of minimal art. He introduced the opposing term *absorption* (I prefer *immersion*) in his 1980 book *Absorption and Theatricality*, where he argues that whenever a self-consciousness of viewing exists, absorption is compromised, and theatricality results.

So all the way down we find absorption in error and indeterminacy to be a beneficial and cherished attribute for art. From what art is – to how it is

² For more on this, see: *Le Message Automatique* (The Automatic Message), André Breton's significant theoretical works about automatism. The essay was first published in the magazine *Minotaure*, No. 3-4, (Paris) in 1933.

made. Indeed, its failure to be clear in its purpose, in its method, and in its reception is one of art's greatest accomplishments. The failure to be clear, in other words to be abstract and vague, is excellent, quite often, (but not always) in art. This non-specific quality of course can be seen as a failure to communicate. This is true if what you want to communicate is information - but untrue if what you want to communicate is sensation.

Thus through failure, great art resists academic templates while at the same time accumulating sensual knowledge.

So strangely, I am interested in a history of art that fails to eliminate indeterminacy and chance operations from among its midst, but rather assigns principle values of interest to those qualities: a history that I call the *art of noise*. I say strangely because this interest in *noise art* - that is visual art as compared to *noise music*³ - has led me to organize my thoughts and feelings of failure into a system of anti-systematic disturbance that I think of as my inner noise depository. Luckily for me, chance-based art does have a small but glorious history (and present) out in the real world, but in no way can it be considered the norm.

In my book *Immersion Into Noise* (2011) I have mapped out a broad-spectrum of aesthetic activity I call the *art of noise* by tracing its past eruptions where figure/ground merge and flip the common emphasis to some extent. *Immersion Into Noise* concludes with a look at the figural aspect of this aesthetic lodged within the ground of consciousness itself.⁴

Such historically grounded, non-cognitive, aesthetic benefits of noise, error and failure is what concerns me for the production and reception of art today. Indeed, the paradox of a dada-like system of anti-systematic action delights and energizes me, even, as it is the basis of artificial-life,⁵ an aspect of my current working practice. And unless we intend to return to a pre-

³ Noise Music in general traffics in dissonance, atonality, distortion, incidental composing, etc. This music begins with Russolo, Luigi's *reti di rumori* (networks of noises) music that he performed on his intonarumori noise instruments and his text "The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto" in Cox, Christoph & Warner, Daniel (ed.): *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, Continuum (2004) For more of the history of noise music, see Hegarty, Paul: *Noise/Music: A History*. New York: Continuum (2007) and pp. 39-47 in Nechvatal, Joseph. *Immersion Into Noise*, Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press (2011)

⁴ This involves a question of the *qualities (and levels) of awareness of our own consciousness* within aesthetic realms which we are capable of attaining through noise art. Nechvatal, Joseph. *Immersion Into Noise*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press (2011) p. 210

⁵ Artificial life (often abbreviated A-Life or A-Life) is a field of study and an associated art form which examine systems related to life, its processes, and its evolution, through the use of simulations with computer models, robotics, and biochemistry.

modern neo-classical naturalism, this funny, sometimes buggy, bound to fail, a-life approach is the way into the future (as I see it): with its strong emphasis on *emergence*. And why not say it: this emergence is nurtured by mixing systematic rules with non-systematic chance operations in the code, a code always subject to modifications and magnificent failures. Thus an a-life inflected art gives us the opportunity to think (or re-think) in our own lives something very valuable for a successful life: the understanding of life-as-art as a form of contingency that cannot ever really fail, but constantly opens up new chances to pursue.

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The Theme: “*Failures*”

Whether imagined, lived or witnessed, most if not all of us know something of what it is to fail. Our machines and tools wear out, becoming trash and artifacts, and infrastructures break down. Living bodies die and become inanimate bone, fossils or food. And our best efforts fall short of the expectations set for them, both by others and ourselves. Yet failure is rarely as straightforward as we might like to think. It seems there is always another way things might have gone – a sustained faith that alternate paths might have revealed themselves if only there had been more time, more resources or greater understanding. On these occasions, we may even wonder how the criteria for failure and success are made, embodied, and critiqued. When a failure appears self-evident, we are still confronted by the question, according to whom? What happens after failure? What are the costs? In sum, what do we do with failure?

The overarching question we want to ask is: what is the work of failure? We hope to explore this question on a number of registers, including but not limited to: (1) failure as desirable, (2) failure as inevitable (3) the engineering of failure and (4) the generative potential of failures. In addressing failure in each of these unique but related ways our aim is two-fold. First, to open failure to an interrogation that spans a wide range of

political, philosophical, temporal, aesthetic and cultural landscapes. This could involve sites as diverse as design practice, queer theory, and international affairs. Our second aim is to challenge participants to engage failure as both event *and* process, opening up new possibilities for what it is and could be to fail.